

Congressman Mike Pence appeared on [PBS with Tavis Smiley](#) to discuss health care reform:

TRANSCRIPT:

Tavis: Congressman Mike Pence of Indiana is the chair of the Republican House Conference and in that capacity is the third highest ranking member of the GOP in the House. Congressman Pence is serving his fifth term in Congress from the great state of Indiana. He joins us tonight from Capitol Hill. Congressman, nice to have you on the program, sir.

Rep. Mike Pence: Thank you, Tavis.

Tavis: Glad to have you on. Let me start by sharing with you a quick story. I was on "Meet the Press" a few weeks ago with my friend Joe Scarborough, as you know, former Republican member of the House, and I didn't get a chance to even make my argument before Joe jumped out first said that Barack Obama, President Obama, doesn't need Republicans. He controls both Houses of Congress. All he's got to do is to rally his own troops. So respectfully, why am I even talking to you on healthcare?

Pence: (Laughs) Well, I don't think it's so much that the president does or doesn't need members of the Republican minority, but the president does need the America people and right now I think the problem that Democrats on Capitol Hill have and the administration has with their plan to launch a government-run insurance plan is that a majority of Americans don't like the plan.

I think we all recognize we've got to achieve some form of healthcare reform that lowers the cost of health insurance, lowers the cost of healthcare, but a government-run insurance plan, including a public option that could cause millions of Americans to lose the insurance they have I think is losing support among the American people and certainly is strongly opposed by Republicans.

Tavis: For those who take your view that the president is wrong about this, that the government ought not to be in the business of healthcare, I hear that point loud and clear. There is another side to this, though, which is many Americans believe that your party is representing the

obstructionist point of view.

To those who think the Republican Party, since the president can't get any votes on this, basically, are being obstructionist, you say what to that?

Pence: Well, I say I think the purpose of the opposition is to oppose every time you do. And whenever principle allows, the purpose of the opposition is to support measures and to work in a bipartisan way. In this measure, there literally are over a half-dozen Republican alternative bills that are clearly described on our conference website, Tavis, at GOP.gov.

Republicans have been bringing forward ideas on issues like how do we deal with the chronically uninsured working in this country, how do we deal with preexisting conditions? Our framework, of course, does not include a massive expansion of the federal government's role, but we've offered alternatives in that regard.

I think Americans understand that, but I think also - I think, as I said before, when principle demands, I do think the purpose of the opposition is to oppose and when it comes to government-run insurance that could lead to a government takeover of healthcare in this country, I think millions of Americans appreciate the opposition that Republicans and, I want to add, some Democrats in Congress have been providing.

Tavis: So pardon, Congressman Pence, the naïveté of the question, but why can't we get bipartisanship on this issue if everybody in America, even John McCain and Sarah Palin, when they ran, agreed that our healthcare system was broken and needed to be fixed?

So if everybody in the country agrees that something is wrong with healthcare, unless you are, again, your party, deliberately being obstructionist and being difficult, or unless, as one of your colleagues said, you deliberately want to make this President Obama's Waterloo, why can't we then get bipartisanship on an issue that everybody seems to agree has got to be addressed?

Pence: Well, I don't think it's a naïve question, I think it's a critical question. It's a question we've really been asking as Republicans since the first of the year, Tavis. We passed the so-called

stimulus bill and no Republican proposals were included in that bill. The budget was developed without Republican input, the same with regard to the energy bill, the so-called cap and trade legislation.

I think millions of Americans who've seen the way Congress has been bringing forward thousand-page bills the day before they're brought to the floor can see that we've really had a profound decline in deliberation on Capitol Hill. Now, why that's occurred I can't really say. You'd have to check with the majority in Congress for why that's the case.

But I do believe millions of Americans would like us during these difficult economic times to take a breath and to come back to the table and find some modest reforms that would really help working families have access to more affordable health insurance without dramatically increasing the size of government or dramatically increasing the debt on our children and grandchildren.

But again, we've not been afforded the opportunity to do that for most of this year and I think that is a frustration to the American people.

Tavis: If government doesn't get involved - and you certainly have every right to express your point of view, as you have, and that's why I'm glad to have you on - if government does not get involved, tell me then how we have increased competition, which even Republicans believe on every other measure that competition, good old enterprise, is what allows for the American public to be better served.

So if government isn't the reason or the rationale or the engine that drives competition so that everybody else who's offering healthcare behaves correctly, then how do you get that competition that benefits all Americans?

Pence: Right. Well, I think it's the right question, and it's another one of those premises upon which Republicans and the administration strongly agree. We recognize that for many states, Tavis, as you know, there's essentially a virtual monopoly where there's just a handful of insurance options available for small business owners, like my state back in Indiana.

We absolutely need to bring competition into that system to drive down the cost and make health insurance more affordable. But we don't believe that the answer is to bring the government in as a competitor. We believe it is let's allow the American people to purchase health insurance across state lines, to look all across these United States and find a health insurance plan for their small business, for their family or for their family farm that makes the most sense for them.

Right now, Hoosiers in my state, people watching all across the country know they can only purchase health insurance in their state with groups that have been formed in their state. We believe that with things like association health plans you could create nationwide insurance products that given the size of the risk pool would by definition almost overnight be more affordable than what's available in most jurisdictions.

That's the kind of competition we believe is the answer. We believed it to the extent that the president's calling for more competition. He's right. I just don't believe that the federal government is an honest and a genuine competitor in the marketplace.

I've said before that the government competes with the private sector the way an alligator competes with a duck - it just consumes it. What we need is bring all 1,300 of those private health insurance companies that are relegated just to states today, allow them to create products for all Americans, and you just watch those costs come down.

Tavis: That's what I miss about being back home in Indiana - those good old Indiana colloquialisms, alligators and ducks. Thank you, Congressman, I appreciate that. (Laughs) Let me fast-forward right quick and maybe we'll get back. Whenever we get on the other side of this healthcare debate, assuming that one day we will, with a measure that either you will support or oppose, but at some point we're going to move on to another issue and hopefully for all Americans have something that is legitimate reform come out of this debate.

When that happens, on the other side, headed toward the midterm elections, there are one of two realities. If the Republicans hold firm and don't support the president there is the hope, as I said at the top of the show, that you all will see a repeat of 1994 by standing firm. Republicans take back the house after being the minority party for some years now. The other side is that this whole strategy backfires on you. What's going to happen?

Pence: Well, I really believe it's - the Republicans should not be thinking of calculations about the midterm elections. I think we just ought to dig in and do what is right for the American people. We understand that we've got to do something to lower the cost of health insurance and lower the cost of healthcare.

Ultimately, even the Congressional Budget Office has identified that the plans that are being moved through the Congress would actually now lower the cost of healthcare in this country, so we need to dig in and do what's right. I think the midterm elections will be less about political posturing and more about whether or not the American people feel that Congress has gotten the message, not just on this issue, Tavis, but I was here in Washington for that taxpayer march on Washington, I did town hall meetings all across eastern Indiana over the month of August. I've traveled the country.

The American people are frustrated with Washington, D.C. and frankly with the political class in both parties that have seen runaway federal spending under Republican and Democrat administrations, borrowing, spending, bailouts, takeovers. If the American people feel like Washington's gotten the message, then that'll play itself out in the midterms.

But if Washington hasn't gotten the message by Election Day, that's usually the day they get it.

Tavis: So finally, then, back to what I referenced earlier, is it your sense as we sit here and talk today that whatever healthcare comes forth is going to come forth without Republican support?

Pence: I hope that's not the case, but so far it has been frustrating. We have seen the Democrat majority move forward with the launching of a government-run insurance plan, including a public option. We've seen mandates, \$800 billion in higher taxes, and we've really seen a resistance to any effort to reduce the size and scope of that proposal or turn toward market-based solutions.

But Tavis, you've been covering Washington for a long time. Hope springs eternal out here, and I think if the millions of Americans who are looking in tonight will continue to let their voices be heard, anything's possible. We might just yet come together and pass the kind of modest reforms that'll really be in the interest of working families and small businesses.

Tavis: From your mouth to God's ears. He's the House Republican Conference chair, Mike Pence of Indiana. Congressman, nice to have you on. Thanks for sharing your insights, I appreciate it.

Pence: Thank you, Tavis.